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# FORCED DISPLACEMENT, SUFFERING AND THE AESTHETICS OF LOSS

Maruška Svašek

## Abstract

*This article investigates how artists have addressed shocking experiences of displacement in different political contexts. Drawing on the notion of 'the aesthetics of loss' (Köstlin, 2010), it examines and compares the different aims, desires and strategies that have shaped the histories and social lives of paintings, memorial statues, installations and other artefacts. The analysis identifies a mode of artistic engagement with the sense of a 'loss of homeland' that has been commonly felt amongst Sudeten German expellees, namely the production and framing of visual images as markers of collective trauma. These aesthetics of loss are contrasted with the approach taken by the Dutch artist Sophie Ernst in her project entitled HOME. Working with displaced people from Pakistan, India, Palestine, Israel and Iraq, she created a mnemonic space to stimulate a more individualistic, exploratory engagement with the loss of home, which aimed, in part, to elicit interpersonal empathy. To simply oppose these two modes of aesthetic engagement, however, would ignore the ways in which artefacts are drawn into different discursive, affective and spatial formations. This article argues for the need to expose such dynamic processes of framing and reframing by focusing on the processual aspects of aestheticisation with attention to the perspective of loss.*

**Keywords:** displacement, trauma, memory, art, aestheticisation, empathy, Sudeten German, Sophie Ernst, refugees

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## Biographical note

Maruška Svašek's main research interests are art, material mediation, migration and the emotions. In her most recent work, she brings these strands together by exploring the mobility and agency of humans, artefacts and images in an era of intensifying globalisation and transnational connectivity. Her publications include *Emotions and Human Mobility: Ethnographies of Movement* (Routledge 2012), *Moving Subjects, Moving Objects: Transnationalism, Cultural Production and Emotions* (Berghahn 2012), *Anthropology, Art and Cultural Production* (Pluto 2007), *Postsocialism: Politics and Emotions in Central and Eastern Europe* (Berghahn 2006) and, (with Kay Milton), *Mixed Emotions: Anthropological Studies of Feeling* (Berg 2005). She is co-editor with Birgit Meyer of the Berghahn book series 'Material Mediations: People and Things in a World of Movement'.

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# FORCED DISPLACEMENT, SUFFERING AND THE AESTHETICS OF LOSS

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In the late 1990s, I conducted research into the expulsion of millions of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia after the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Their forced migration from the Sudetenland was supported by the international Potsdam agreement, which sought to justify the removal of ethnic Germans from all over Central and Eastern Europe. It was thought to be the proper political solution to avoid further instability in the region, given that Germans were regarded as collectively guilty of crimes committed by the Nazi regime. In Czechoslovakia, the exodus was legalised by the Beneš decrees, a series of stipulations that removed Sudeten German citizenship rights and authorised their loss of property (Maeder, 2011; Staněk 1991; Svašek 2005).

Particularly for those who experienced or witnessed acts of violence during this mass eviction, the event was traumatising. In 1946 and 1947, thousands of Sudeten Germans were killed by angry Czech citizens and Russian troops and never made it to the border. Many women were raped, and numerous Sudeten Germans hanged themselves, fearing aggressive reprisals. In his book about the expulsion from the Egerland region, the physician Wolf-Dieter Hamperl (himself one of those who was expelled), noted that '[m]any expellees who experienced such excesses can even now, after fifty years, not talk or think about their experiences because the shock was too great' (1996, p.228, my translation). Obviously, acts of anti-German aggression after the Second World War must be placed in the context of the perpetrators' own war experiences and that they happened at a time when facts about the excesses of Nazi crimes, in particular the immense suffering of those sent to concentration camps, became public knowledge. Historians have offered different perspectives on the expulsion, such as justifying anti-German violence as an acceptable consequence of war (Lůza 1964), condemning it as a state directed policy of ethnic cleansing (de Zayas 1994), or taking a more balanced approach (Staněk 1991; 1996).

<sup>1</sup> The most recent estimated figures are that around 2.7 million ethnic Germans were expelled and that between 19,000 and 30,000 died at the time of the expulsion, including 6,000 victims of acts of violence and around 5,000 suicides (Glassheim, 2000, p.463; Czech-German Joint Commission of Historians, 1996).

This article investigates how artists of different backgrounds have addressed shocking experiences of displacement in different political contexts – including the Sudeten German expulsion – through the production of a variety of paintings, memorial statues, installations and other artefacts. Drawing on the notion of 'the aesthetics of loss' (Köstlin, 2010), and the perspective of 'aestheticisation' (Svašek, 2007), I examine and compare the different aims, desires and strategies that have shaped the histories and social lives of such objects. Taking a processual approach to material culture (see also Svašek, 2007 and 2012), I regard artefacts as objects that gain particular meanings, appeal and emotional agency in specific social and political settings. I will address the following questions. How do artistic responses to violence and loss of homeland articulate specific concerns about the past, present and future? In what ways are these concerns expressed through practices of memorialisation within wider structures of authority, be they museums, art worlds, (trans)national organisations or political structures? How exactly are these concerns expressed by those who produce, use and frame visual imagery?

The first part of the analysis focuses on artefacts produced by and for Sudeten German expellees. The second part explores a series of art installations made by a Dutch artist in response to the displacement of people from South Asia and the Middle East.

## Processing and representing shocking experiences

When thinking about the ways in which people deal with emotionally disturbing pasts, it is important to make a distinction between encounters with dangerous circumstances that are quite common and more easily processed, and intensely shocking experiences that have longer-term impact. A normal response to danger (for example, when a person crosses a road without looking and suddenly has to avoid an oncoming vehicle), consists of physical arousal of the sympathetic nervous system and an automatic attempt to avoid the perilous situation. This flight or fight response produces a state of concentrated attention during which feelings of hunger, pain or fatigue are no longer sensed, and immediate action is taken with the aim of reaching safety. Once out of danger, often after an initial period of shock, people can more easily recall and talk about the event, integrating it with their life stories.

In the case of trauma, whether caused by natural disasters or human atrocities, victims are rendered helpless at the moment of the occurrence and cannot show normal responses to danger. Medical

and psychiatric models of trauma have focused on the resulting abnormal clinical conditions that affect the traumatised bodies of individual victims, including hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction (Herman, 1994; Leys, 2002; Caruth, 1996). Hyperarousal and intrusion are manifested through persistent expectations of danger and unusual forms of memory, such as uncontrollable flashbacks and repeated nightmares. In some cases, intrusion also leads to compulsive re-enactments of the traumatic event. Constriction refers to the after-effect of the numbing response of surrender to perpetrators, triggering involuntary emotional detachment and the repression of memory (Herman, 1994).

A significant number of social scientists have argued that medical models of trauma tend to ignore or de-emphasise the social and political causes of bodily distress. Kleinman and Kleinman (1991) coined the term 'social suffering' to critique the de-humanising medicalisation of trauma and to highlight the social and political processes producing traumatising. Other scholars, including Capelletto (2003), Daniel (1994), O'Neill (2000), Kidron (2004) and White (2000), have analysed the political dimensions of trauma in different settings of inequality and war. Volkan (1997) has introduced the notion of 'chosen trauma' to explore how, after traumatising episodes, groups of victims (sometimes including those indirectly affected and others identifying with the cause) have been engaged in trauma politics, forming survivor groups that search for acknowledgement and compensation. This perspective aims to move beyond an understanding of trauma victims as passive subjects or disempowered patients, a trend also reflected in the use of the term *trauma survivors*.

When investigating the social dynamics of traumatic displacement, the personal, political and institutional responses clearly need to be explored together. Numerous questions emerge, not least: To what extent can survivor groups adequately represent the suffering of individuals? How do the specific political aims of particular groups shape artistic manifestations of distress?<sup>2</sup>

### **Representing trauma: reframing people, places and things**

Group identification through chosen trauma often entails the active reframing of places and things as signifiers of past (and ongoing) suffering. As part of

this process, material artefacts and other elements in the landscape are in many cases presented as historical evidence and are integrated elements in affective sites of commemoration. Materialisations of past suffering have included places of past horror and destruction (for example prison cells in South Africa, or Nazi concentration camps), clothing and other properties (shoes and hair in Auschwitz), documents and other texts (Anne Frank's diary in Amsterdam's Anne Frank House Museum), used weapons and ammunition (plastic bullets from the time of the Troubles in the Museum of Free Derry, Northern Ireland) and instruments of oppression and torture (chains and shackles used in the transatlantic slave trade, in the Bristol Industrial Museum). In addition to the presentation of historical artefacts, new objects and spaces have also been created with the aim of commemorating victims of violence. As numerous scholars have argued, such past-oriented memorial activities are strongly anchored in the present. James Young, for example, showed convincingly in his comparative study of Holocaust memorials in Germany, Poland, Israel and America that individual monuments do not only 'create and reinforce particular memories of the Holocaust period' but are also part and parcel of ongoing politics, as the stories of suffering 're-enter political life shaped by monuments' (Young, 1993, p. 14).

When those who are commemorated have died in international warfare, memorial sites tend both to remember the deceased as individuals and to portray them as a group of heroes who gave their lives collectively for the nation. Turned into national museums, historical places of past violence thus aim to produce a variety of emotions, including gratefulness, admiration and patriotism. A good example is the Museum of Pearl Harbor, where special tours are designed to give US visitors 'the opportunity to pay respects to the fallen sailors and brave heroes of December 7, 1941'.<sup>3</sup> To enhance a sense of authenticity, surviving USS Arizona crewmen directly communicate with visitors and narrate personal stories of the attack. Visitors are also exposed to three-dimensional copies of artefacts still on board the sunken vessels (Starr, 2014). The reframing of specific people and things in a museum space can thus have the aim of instilling a sense of historical reality for visitors; in the Museum of Pearl Harbor it enables an encounter with the suffering, yet ultimately triumphant, nation.

2 Various recent books have explored the portrayal of trauma and traumatic events in contemporary media, for example focusing on visual artists (Guerin and Hallas, 2007), writers and filmmakers (Kaplan, 2005).

3 Tour operators emphasise the need for visitors to emotionally identify with those who died, 'feeling first hand the emotions of the Pearl Harbor attacks is something that all visitors to Hawaii should experience'. (<https://www.pearlharborage.com>).

In cases of forced migration, memorial sites often include material objects taken from the country of origin as well as photographic and other depictions of familiar places and people in it. In the Sudeten German case, artefacts that aim to commemorate experiences of homeland include photographs and paintings of idyllic pre-war scenes, folkloristic items and other things taken during the flight, as well as iconic artefacts that directly symbolise the process of actual relocation, such as trunks, suitcases and handcars. In addition, the products include depictions of people in distress. Presented in spaces that are (at least temporarily) controlled by diasporic expellees, these artefacts have not only strengthened feelings of connectedness to a lost homeland but have been used to construct and politicise a sense of collective trauma.

### Lost homes: Objects of nostalgia, grief and anger

Many visual representations of the old Sudetenland circulating in expellee networks depict people's former homes. As visual references to pre-expulsion life and ownership of property, they are powerful signifiers that can be drawn into different discourses. The objects can

also express and trigger a variety of feelings, from mild nostalgia, to re-lived fear and politicised anger.

Figure 2.3.1 shows a painting that ended up in the collection of the Sudetendeutsches Museum in Munich in 2013. The work was commissioned in Bavaria in 1972, and depicts the former family house of Josef Matz. The image is painted after a photograph that Matz took with him during the expulsion twenty-six years earlier, and it became a gift on his seventy-fifth birthday.

The gift signifies his continued attachment to the old family house, and highlights Matz's Sudeten German roots. In the second half of the twentieth century, this type of painting became quite common. It was produced for expellees in response to a strong demand for material reminders of the lost Sudetenland which were scarce, due to the fact that the expellees had been forced to leave most of their property behind. Professional painters offered the service in *Heimatbriefe* and *Heimatbote*, journals and newsletters that were produced by expellees for the purpose of trying to stay in touch (Fendl, 2013). Evidently, since expellees elderly enough to remember the old Sudetenland are dying out, some of their offspring, such as Matz's, have decided to donate the works to museums. In their



Fig 2.3.1: Blechschmidt, untitled, oil painting of a house in the Sudetenland, 28cm x 39.5cm. Courtesy of the Sudetendeutsches Museum, Munich.





Fig 2.3.2: Gustav Zindel, untitled, painting of a village scene in the Sudetenland, 1952. Courtesy of the Sudetendeutsches Museum, Munich.

transition to larger collections, the items partially lose their more personal meaning and are reframed as examples of a specific genre, signifying both 'Sudeten German culture' and 'collective displacement'.

Köstlin (2010, p.9) has used the term 'aesthetics of loss' to explore how inner, invisible experiences of continuing distress have been visualised and externalised by Sudeten German expellees as objectified truth, thus producing material, visible 'evidence' of injustice. The perspective can be used to think further about the effects of homeland depictions displayed in the diaspora. To those who remember the expulsion, the paintings have created a visual presence, evoking memories and feelings of pain, pride and resentment, even when no actual words have been spoken. The art works have also been appropriated as part of a discourse of injustice by a larger group of people who identify with the Sudeten German cause, including groups of offspring and some politicians, especially in Bavaria. As signifiers of 'loss', they visually reinforce an outspoken political rhetoric of 'stolen homeland' and 'ethnic cleansing', calling for *Heimatrecht* (see below).

In another painting, the lost homeland is visualised as a nostalgic space of childhood innocence. Painted in 1952 by Gustav Zindel,<sup>4</sup> it depicts a village scene of children playing peacefully in a quiet street, as in a zone of timeless happiness (Figure 2.3.2). Such paintings were also common. On the walls of people's homes in new places of settlement, they evoked their longing for an idyllic, unproblematic past, ignoring other historical occurrences, such as pre-expulsion Nazi rule and the moment of the expulsion. The perspective of the aesthetics of loss highlights the selectivity of this process of remembering and forgetting, resulting in the construction of a mythical place of imagination and belonging.

4 Zindel stayed in Czechoslovakia at the time of the expulsion and died there in the late 1950s. Several categories of Sudeten Germans were allowed by the post-war Czechoslovak government to remain in the country, including Social Democrats who had opposed Nazism, people in mixed Czech-German marriages and workers who were vital to particular industries. Many felt a sense of nostalgia for pre-expulsion times, as they were now strongly outnumbered by ethnic Czechs who occupied the empty houses, left behind by the expellees. Following Zindel's death his family relocated to Germany.

Paintings and prints of scenes in the Sudetenland, as well as old maps and photographs, have also circulated through *Heimattbriefe* and *Heimattbücher*. The book *Wie's früher war im Egerland* ('How it used to be in Egerland'), published in 1986, is a typical example of interspersed visual-textual nostalgia, creating a sense of a diasporic community that is linked by shared memories and emotions. In the foreword (to Raak, 1986), Bavarian State Secretary (and expellee) Dr Preißler states that the book creates 'a world that we, Egerländer, draw on when, without earth or soil, we build our mental homeland in the future.'<sup>5</sup> The book, which today can be bought online,<sup>6</sup> contains stories, poems and memories of life in Egerland (a former region in the Sudetenland) that are illustrated with drawings and woodcut prints. A story about the musician Anton Zartner, for example, is accompanied by a woodcut of a dancing couple in folk costume. The story ends with a description of how it happened that after Zartner's death in 1921 his violin was displayed by his grandchildren in a beautiful old inn where it hung in 1946, at the time of the expulsion. 'Since then it got lost, just like our *Heimat* itself, the beautiful Egerland' (Heidler, 1986, p.71). In the book, the image of the disappeared violin is thus reframed as marker of the 'collective' pain of displacement.

### Memorials to injustice: The stolen Sudetenland

During the first decades after the expulsion, many Sudeten Germans hoped to return to the Sudetenland. As part of institutionalised expellee politics, led by the Sudetendeutsche Landmannschaft, discourses of loss were politicised through public calls for *Heimatrecht*, the right for the return of 'stolen' property. Stories and witness statements of violence, murder, rape and torture strengthened an embodied, internalised presence of a 'stolen Sudetenland'. They also fed a strong notion of 'collective victimhood', a process of identification whereby people did not necessarily need to tell their own personal stories of loss or suffering to claim victimhood.

Soon after the expulsion, visual evidence of anti-Sudeten German aggression and claims to injustice began to circulate in the form of photographs and film fragments. Artistic interpretations followed, for example

<sup>5</sup> 'Aus diesen Seiten entsteht eine Welt, von der wir Egerländer heute noch zehren, wenn wir ohne Grund und Boden unsere geistige Heimat in die Zukunft bauen (...). Dieses Buch dient der Regeneration der Seele in einer Zeit, die von uns einen langen geschichtlichen Atem fordert'.

<sup>6</sup> A vast selection of Sudeten German commodities is available for sale on the internet, such as from the publisher Preußler, see <http://preussler-verlag.de/downloads/buchprospekt.pdf> (accessed 17.8.2014).

two small sculptures produced in 1986 by Gerfried Schellberger, entitled 'Massacre' (Figure 2.3.3) and 'Heavy Load' (Figure 2.3.4). The first shows a group of people massacred by two armed guards. The second has strong religious connotations, portraying a Jesus-like figure carrying the cross, associating the suffering of the Sudeten Germans to Christian notions of a suffering son of God. This idea of sacred victimhood was emphasised when photographs of the statues were reproduced in a book entitled *Sudetendeutscher Totentanz. Ein Martyrium unseres 20. Jahrhunderts* (The Sudeten German Dance of Death. A Case of Martyrdom in our 20th Century) (Schellberger, 1991).

Especially in Bavaria, where most Sudeten German expellees settled, numerous memorials have been unveiled since the 1950s, creating ritual sites to commemorate Sudeten German victims of crimes committed during the expulsion, and the loss of the



Fig 2.3.3. Gerfried Schellberger, *Massacre*, 1986. Clay, 21 cm x 47 cm x 27 cm. Courtesy of the Sudetendeutsches Museum, Munich.



Figure 2.3.4. Gerfried Schellberger, *Heavy Load*, 1986. Clay, 30 cm x 27 cm x 18 cm. Courtesy of the Sudetendeutsches Museum, Munich.



Sudetenland (Weger, 2010). Of others constructed during the Cold War close to the former Iron Curtain, is the work designed in 1980 by the artist Hans Krappel. This monument for Sudeten Germans who had been expelled from the area of Znaim (today the Czech city of Znojmo) was placed not far from the city, on West German territory. The central figure in stone shows a mother, embracing her children in a protective gesture. A staircase leads to a platform, facing the Czechoslovak-West German border, high enough to see the old homeland. A bronze plaque indicates the location of 94 communities in the area, and the text reads: 'Homeland rights are human rights.' The monument, which still stands at the same spot in 2014, encourages a specific way of seeing that shapes the viewing experience as a moment of moral reflection on human rights. The intended message is clearly that the forced displacement of the Sudeten German was a crime against humanity.

Some memorials refer to the relocation of the expellees or their integration in new countries of settlement. In the German town of Furth im Wald, for example, *Denkmal der heimatvertriebenen Sudetendeutschen* (Monument for the homeland-expelled Sudeten Germans) contains references both to the lost homeland and to a camp where some expellees were housed after their arrival. The camp remained in use until 1958. The monument has a block-like structure and on its front is a bronze map of the Czech Republic, with the Sudetenland marked as separate territory (see Figure 2.3.5).



Fig 2.3.5. Monument for the homeland-expelled Sudeten Germans. Bronze, Furth im Wald. Courtesy of Kultur Museum, Furth im Wald.



Fig 2.3.6. Monument for the homeland-expelled Sudeten Germans. Furth im Wald. Courtesy of Kultur Museum, Furth im Wald.

On top stands a three dimensional bronze model of the camp that was used to house the expellees (*Grenzdurchgangslager Furth im Wald*), and beside it are the words 'Erste Station in der Freiheit für 750.000 Vertriebene' (First location in freedom for 750,000 expellees) (see Figure 2.3.6).

The monument was unveiled in December 2006 and inaugurated by the city priest (Stadtpfarrer) Richard Meier, who also prayed for the well-being of the expellees and their families during the event. His speech, as well as the monument, acknowledged the continued significance of the Sudetenland to many of them, but also emphasised their post-expulsion settlement in the new environment.

### Organisational dynamics: Museums and institutions

The expellees who can still actively remember life in the old homeland have become a rapidly declining group in the twenty-first century. The situation was radically different after the expulsion when, from the 1950s onwards, large groups of expellees from all over the Sudetenland began to establish *Heimat* groups, *Heimattuben* and *Heimat* museums, most of all in Germany and Austria. These networks of institutions and museums, some of them supported by local governments, facilitated social interaction and stimulated the production and circulation of artefacts that symbolised the 'loss of homeland'. In the past 60 years, many thousands of artefacts have been presented in hundreds of permanent Sudeten German displays, temporary shows and travelling exhibitions, visualising a sense of shared identity (Völkening, 2010).

The reassertion of Sudeten German cultural identity exposes a politics of memory that is informed by a layered process of identification. Artefacts are reframed not only as objects of 'shared victimhood' through practices of chosen trauma, but are also presented as 'Sudeten German heritage', evoking pride of a Sudeten German *Heimatkultur* that its advocates feel the need to nourish and preserve.<sup>7</sup> This appropriation

7 While the very notion of *Heimat* has changed, connections to earlier discourses of *Heimat* should not be ignored (<http://www.bohemistik.de/gedichte.html>). The state of Bavaria has claimed the responsibility to conserve and further develop Sudetengerman 'Kultur': 'Bayern hat 1954 die Schirmherrschaft über die Sudetendeutsche Volksgruppe und 1978 die Patenschaft über die Landsmannschaft der Ostpreußen übernommen. Bayern fühlt sich aber den Anliegen aller deutscher Heimatvertriebenen, Flüchtlinge und Spätaussiedler verpflichtet und unterstützt sie im Sinne des § 96 BVFG bei Bewahrung, Pflege und Weiterentwicklung ihrer Kultur'. Further detail may be found at: <http://www.sozialministerium.bayern.de/vertriebene/kulturerbe/index.php>.

of artefacts in new spatial and discursive contexts calls for a processual perspective on aesthetic practice. In my previous work, I used the perspective of 'aestheticisation' to explore how artefacts and images in transit (i.e. appearing in new times and places), gain new meanings, values and emotional efficacy, for example making transitions from 'art' to 'pornography', from 'kitsch' to 'craft', or from 'art' to 'propaganda' (Svašek, 2007). Reproduced or exhibited in different media and venues, Sudeten German cultural productions, such as images of family homes or people in folk costumes, have also been 'aestheticised' in new ways. The oil painting discussed earlier (Figure 2.3.1), for example, was given to the Sudetendeutsche museum in Munich in 2013, thus becoming part of a wider story of Sudeten German cultural history.



Fig 2.3.7: Embroidered Pillowcase. Courtesy of Sudeten German Museum, Munich.

The Museum also holds other types of material objects, such as an embroidered pillowcase that warns expellees 'not to forget their Homeland'. Evidently, such a text potentially strengthens viewers' feelings of injustice about the Sudeten German displacement, presenting it as a moral obligation 'not to forget' (see Franzen, 2010 and Eisler, 2011).<sup>8</sup>

Other works, now also part of museum collections, directly feed into a discourse of traumatic displacement. Not long after the expulsion, postcards depicting Sudeten Germans about to leave their villages or towns were quite popular (see Fendl, 2010, p.56). In July 1950, for example, *Heimatsbote für die Bezirke Tachau-Pfrauberg und Bischofteinitz* (Homeland News for the Regions Tachau-Pfrauberg and Bischofteinitz) published a postcard painted by Heinrich Fitzthum. The painting on the card showed a group of people before their deportation, some waiting as Czech officials

8 Textual and visual discourses of *Heimat* should therefore be analysed in tandem, as has been pointed out by Milič (2012) in his analysis of newsletters produced by Italians expelled after the Second World War from Croatia.





Fig 2.3.8: Richard Assmann, painting reproduced on a Postcard, 1950s. Courtesy of Sudeten German Museum, Munich.

checked their luggage, others sitting on their trunks, their faces expressing despair. Figure 2.3.8 shows a similar scene, painted by Richard Assmann in the 1950s. Reproduced on and circulating as postcards amongst the expellees, these images strengthened notions of collective trauma.

Köstlin (2010) has compared the visual memorialisation of Sudeten German suffering to the pictorialisation (*Veranschaulichung*) of transcendence in religious fields of practice. In both cases, an invisible, sacred transcendental realm (of 'the divine' in the former case, and of 'Sudeten German collectivity' in the latter) is made accessible, and sensorially real, through material mediation.<sup>9</sup>

The notion of a shared Sudeten German history and heritage has also been supported through other political means. The regional state of Bavaria has been particularly supportive of expellee cultural politics since it took on the guardianship (*Patenschaft*) for Sudeten

German expellees in 1954.<sup>10</sup> In accordance with 'cultural paragraph 96' of the 1953 Federal Expellee Law, Bavarian policies have financially supported the creation and maintenance of Sudeten German libraries, archives and museums, aiming to preserve 'objects of cultural significance' (Maeder, 2011, p.217). Thus aestheticised as items of historical importance that are cherished by the state of Bavaria, the connection of the artefacts to personal or collective experiences of Sudeten German loss has been underplayed. As recently as May 2014, Bavaria's Minister of Social Affairs Emilia Müller announced the Bavarian regional government's decision to help finance the construction of a new Sudeten German museum in Munich, which is to be opened in 2018.<sup>11</sup> The display will incorporate a more self-critical historical section, including exhibits that show the active political involvement of Sudeten Germans during the oppressive Third Reich. This will

<sup>9</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, religious and political discourses of the sacred have also overlapped in expellee cultural productions, for example, in homeland poems that imagine the Sudetenland as a gift of God, or in depictions of Sudeten German churches and graveyards as spaces of personal religious significance.

<sup>10</sup> As the majority of the expellees resettled in Bavaria, integrating economically and intermarrying with local Germans, this is not surprising (Maier and Tullio, 1995; Ziegler, 1995, p. 138).

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the construction of the Sudeten German museum, see <http://www.bdv-bayern.de/de/Pressemitteilungen/2014/Mai/Planungen-zum-Sudetendeutschen-Museum> (accessed 10.6.2014).

form part of a wider historical narrative of 'Life in the Bohemian countries, nationalisation, National Socialism, war, expulsion, integration (with all the difficulties), and a new dialogue between the Sudeten Germans and the Czechs' (Fendl, 2014).

### Other critical engagements and cross-border activities

During my research between 1992 and 1994, I encountered numerous expellees who admitted that the Sudeten German politics of trauma was often embarrassingly one-sided, paying no attention to the suffering of Czech, Slovak, Jewish and Romani populations in the context of the Second World War. Rather than dwell on the loss of their homeland, these expellees engaged anew with their place of birth through occasional visits and cooperation with Czechs who had settled in former Sudeten German property. Some were also involved in reconciliatory cross-border links between municipalities<sup>12</sup> and in church initiatives. Through these activities they created new, positive memories and emotional experiences.<sup>13</sup>

The new cross-border politics of trauma have been characterised by exchanges of public references to, or apologies for, the causing of suffering to those on the other side – a cause for outrage amongst German and Czech extremist nationalist groups. Such exchanges have also inspired several artists in the Czech Republic to create critical works on the theme of the expulsion. One such is the photographer Lukáš Houdek who produced the series *The Art of Killing* in 2013, which reconstructed concrete historical instances of anti-Sudeten German aggression acted out by Barbie Dolls. In an interview with Radio Prague, he reflected on the one-sidedness of much Czech historiography, and explained

I searched in archives for materials and some historical studies and also spoke to people who saw cases or had family members killed in this way. I tried to reconstruct the situations as they happened (...). I don't try to judge the expulsions or the murders, because people were of course angry after the war and it's very hard to judge it now. But what I don't like, and what I would like to show, is just to show the cases, to say that they really existed. I want the public to say, yes, this happened, and maybe we should talk about it

(Willoughby, 2013)

### HOME: Beyond mass-killings and violence

I had in mind this background of research on Sudeten German histories when participating in a public debate at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park Museum on World Refugee Day in 2012. I was invited to talk about emotional dimensions of belonging and non-belonging amongst migrants and refugees. The event included a viewing of *HOME*, an exhibition by the Dutch artist Sophie Ernst which comprised a series of installations, resulting from her collaboration with displaced people in Pakistan, Palestine and Israel. Although Ernst herself is not directly affected by the loss of a homeland (much like the Czech artist Houdek), the series and its accompanying book publication, *Home: Architecture of Memory*, have provided a fascinating exploration of questions of displacement. The book has allowed further space for reflection, presenting fragments of the conversations accompanied with reflective essays by various scholars who discuss themes of suffering, memory, imagination and emotional attachment.

In order to elucidate Ernst's intentions and explore the psychosocial workings of her project, Köstlin's perspective of the 'aesthetics of loss' must be stretched to include visualisations of past suffering that do not claim the objective historical truth of collective trauma. Rather, her project stimulated a subtle process of personal remembering and imagination, shying away from political discourses of 'unjust violence'. As I will describe, she addressed the issue of loss by providing an exploratory mnemonic space for her collaborators. The resulting series of gallery installations consisted of film projections onto models of houses that stimulated viewers to reflect on the theme of displacement. Ernst tried to speak to what she saw as a common human ability to identify with the pain of others. Unlike most Sudeten German expellees, she refrained from a discourse of human rights and did not discuss the possible need for public apologies, which made her work radically different from expellee articulations of loss.

<sup>12</sup> Evidence of which is given here: <http://saaz.info/index.php/about/saazer-weg/> (accessed 3.9.2014).

<sup>13</sup> Many supported the activities of the Ackerman Gemeinde, a Catholic organisation established by Sudeten German expellees in Germany in 1946. Acknowledging (especially after 1989) that in the context of the Second World War, groups of Sudeten Germans were directly or indirectly responsible for the suffering of Czechoslovak citizens, the organization's website expresses its involvement in 'practical peace work in the service of reconciliation – especially with the peoples of East Central Europe'. As such, '[h]istorical consciousness, cultural and social responsibility characterise [the organisation's] actions today'. In the context of European Union policy, it claims to be 'committed to maintaining an atmosphere arising from the spirit of Christianity and European unification.' For more information, see, <http://www.ackermann-gemeind.bistum-wuerzburg.de> and <http://saaz.info/index.php/about/saazer-weg/> Accessed (4.8.2014).



Ernst was born in Germany in 1972 and grew up in the Netherlands. Completing an art degree at the *Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunst* in Amsterdam in 2000, she worked from 2003 to 2007 as Assistant Professor at the Beaconhouse National University in Lahore, Pakistan. There, she became interested in questions of displacement against the backdrop of violent conflict. During the Partition in 1947, over 10 million people crossed borders to escape hostility; Muslims fled from India to Pakistan and Hindus escaped from Pakistan to India, and the estimated number of victims of the violence is estimated at around one million. In his essay in *Home: Architecture of Memory*, US-based Pakistani artist and art historian Iftikhar Dadi (2012, pp.20-1), noted that,

[t]he toll is enormous in many registers, from destruction of life and property to the very loss of belonging to a locale. These emotional costs are unacknowledged publicly (apart from a small number of 'unofficial' works by writers and intellectuals), and yet exert a major, largely destructive, force on political and social relations between India and Pakistan, as well as in various communities of the Middle East.

Hammad Nasar (Nasar, 2012, p.14), curator and co-founder of the London-based arts organisation Green Cardamom that produced the group exhibition *Lines of Control: Partition as Productive Space*,<sup>14</sup> suggested that the lack of a public memorial to commemorate victims of the partition 'signals a discomfort in rendering these memories in concrete form'. According to Murtaza Vali (2012, p.117), this is partly because there was

no clear distinction between perpetrator and victim as both 'sides' raped and killed and were raped and killed; guilt and victimhood were hopelessly intertwined across newly formed borders.

Ongoing tensions and violence between Muslims and Hindus in Pakistan and India have also hampered the creation of a memorial site. What have dominated are widely circulating stories and images of horrific killings.

<sup>14</sup> The exhibition was co-curated in 2012 by Hammad Nasar, Iftikhar Dadi, Ellen Avril and Nada Raza. In its expanded show in the Johnson Museum at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University, it dealt not only with the 1947 partition of India, but also with other partitioned areas, including North and South Korea, Sudan and South Sudan, Israel and Palestine, Armenia and its diaspora, Ireland and Northern Ireland, and broached questions of indigenous sovereignty in the United States (Dadi and Nasar, 2012, p.7).

Ernst, by contrast, aimed to transcend discourses of 'the violent Partition', and focused instead on people's intimate memories of the houses they had left behind. She explained:

A house is a concrete object; it makes you see the issue from another point of view, and you go beyond the clichés. You can't avoid them but they are no longer the endpoint.

Her juxtaposition of politicised imagery of horror on the one hand, and personal stories of home on the other, recalled for me the different Sudeten German discourses of 'loss of homeland' that I have been researching. As I have made clear, on the one hand, standardised public accounts of collective trauma isolated a 'Sudeten German tragedy' that was framed as source of suffering and object of expellee politics and identity. On the other, there were individual accounts of attachment that could not be reduced to stories of injustice. The tension between different accounts of past events, a central theme in theories of social memory, has also been addressed by the UK-based writer and literary critic Amer Hussein (2012, p.55), who has argued that standardised discourses – 'codified fiction', in his terminology – tend to ignore alternative memories. In a recording made in London in 2011, transcribed for the publication *Home*, he argued that,

[m]emory becomes fiction only because it is codified, or becomes a film and is codified and recorded forever. But once you have made that record, whether a mental construction or a written or visual one, you tend to return to the record rather than to the facts behind it.

In Hussein's view, producers of texts or (moving) imagery can escape the consequences of codification through openness to alternative interpretations of the past. Drawing tacitly on the work of various academics in the field of postcolonial studies, including James Clifford,<sup>15</sup> he argued that these more complex stories are based on 'a journey with more routes – ROUTES – than the journey one has followed'. Repetitive stories of a collective past, in other words, need to be destabilised through attention to experiential and interpretational diversity. Hussein notes:

[t]hat is where history comes in. It is another version of the canonical narrative, it has more slip-pages, and those slippages are not are not just about leaving for one reason or another. It

<sup>15</sup> See for example, James Clifford (1997) who has explored postcolonial predicaments through an analytical framework based on the concepts of 'roots' and 'routes', and Stuart Hall (2002).

has to do with many complexities, with individual versions of history rather than standardised ones (2012, p.58)

For this individual, there is a moral need for personal remembering beyond clichéd stories: '[a]mnesia is a sin' (2012, p. 58). Obviously, as pointed out in the first part of this article, severely traumatised people are often unable to deal with painful pasts, and should in many cases not be forced to remember violence, as this might cause them further harm. When dealing with people who have suffered, in other words, questions about research ethics must be asked seriously, not only by social scientists but also by artists. In HOME, Ernst seems to have taken such a sensitive approach, providing a supportive environment for her collaborators to remember their lost homes, allowing them to withdraw at any time. Her project made the process of individual recollection both possible and accessible, and by incorporating the resulting personal stories in publicly displayed installations, she opened them up a wider art audience.

### HOME: A participatory multi-locational project

To produce HOME, Ernst took on a participatory approach, in step with much contemporary art practice since the nineteen-nineties.<sup>16</sup> In the case of HOME, a project created between 2006 and 2009, Ernst approached displaced people in Pakistan, India, Palestine and Israel who were willing to engage in conversations about the houses that they had left behind in their homelands. At the start of the project the artist organised sessions with Muslims residing in Pakistan who described their former homes in India. The conversations were open-ended and were often set up as dialogues between older and younger participants. In 2007, for example, the 84-year old India-born writer Intizar Husain was brought into conversation in Lahore with the 39-year old artist Rashid Rana, the Pakistan-born son of parents who had, like Husain, moved from India to Pakistan. At the start of the session, Intizar recalled how he had arrived in Pakistan in the last months of 1947, 'probably on the last train from Meerut [in India]'. He recalled,

[a]t that point rioting had subsided, though the danger was surely felt on the train. Trains were still being attacked, but the intensity was not the

same. For me it was a spontaneous action, not a premeditated plan. Maybe it was a subconscious thing and was fated that way

(Ernst, 2012, p.52)

Following Ernst's instructions, Rana did not prompt Husain to further elaborate on the train attacks, but rather asked him to imagine the house he had left behind in India. Rashid used photographs on his laptop of houses to trigger the process of recollection, and requested details that stimulated Intizar to further engage in memory work. The latter reflected on the challenge of elicitation, especially when needing to describe objects of longing and loss.

I can explain the map – the thing is I imagine the *basti* [town], but how would I articulate it? It's like reading a beautiful poem, and then you start verbalizing it in prose. So in actuality it was an ordinary *basti*, like any other *basti* in the Subcontinent. Yet now that I look back, I realize that in all this time, since my childhood and adolescence there until now, I have been longing for it constantly. The image in my mind – that *basti* has greatly transformed. Now that I recount the *basti*, my imagination might have added to it

(Ernst, 2012, p.53)

Ernst's project did not only focus on people who had fled from India to Pakistan, but she broadened her scope to include people who had fled in the opposite direction. Her artworks, in other words, did not deal with the suffering of a specific group, as was the case with the Sudeten German artworks discussed in this article, but focused more generally on experiences of displacement. This wider approach transformed the individual sessions into related works of art, presented as a single series of art installations, which stimulated identification across Hindu-Muslim divides. As Dadi (2012b, p.21) noted in a discussion of Ernst's work:

wounded and resilient memory can also serve as a kind of psychic ground for sympathetically resituating the self in relation to the losses others have also experienced.

Over the years, Ernst decided to further extend her project to include participants from two more groups, the first group being Palestinians who had been displaced by Ashkenazi Jews, (the latter having left or escaped from Europe to the newly established state of Israel). The second group consisted of Mizrahi Jews who had fled from Iraq to Israel in the mid-20th century. Ernst's appropriation of fragments of their stories in similar-looking installations created a sense of shared predicament, and aestheticised the separate art

<sup>16</sup> The trend comprises of collaborative work that often aims to address social and political issues, from poverty to sexual inequality to trauma. For a critical overview, see Bishop, 2012.

works as examples of a common theme. She presented the process of remembering and forgetting home as an exploratory process of searching and interpretative reconstruction that was comparable, and purposely avoided a more detailed engagement with the historical specificities of each political conflict.

### Drawing as mnemonic negotiation

The younger discussion partners of the conversations set up by Ernst were mostly relatives working in

creative vocations, including artists, architects and photographers. She asked them to help sketch the features of the houses as their older family members described them. In some cases, there was no relative present. Figures 2.3.9 and 2.3.10 show the hands of the 70-year old, New York-based printmaker Zarina Hashimi. She used photographs to recreate the ground plan of her old home in Aligarh, a place in India that she had not visited for 50 years. Interestingly, one of the photographs did not only trigger memories, but

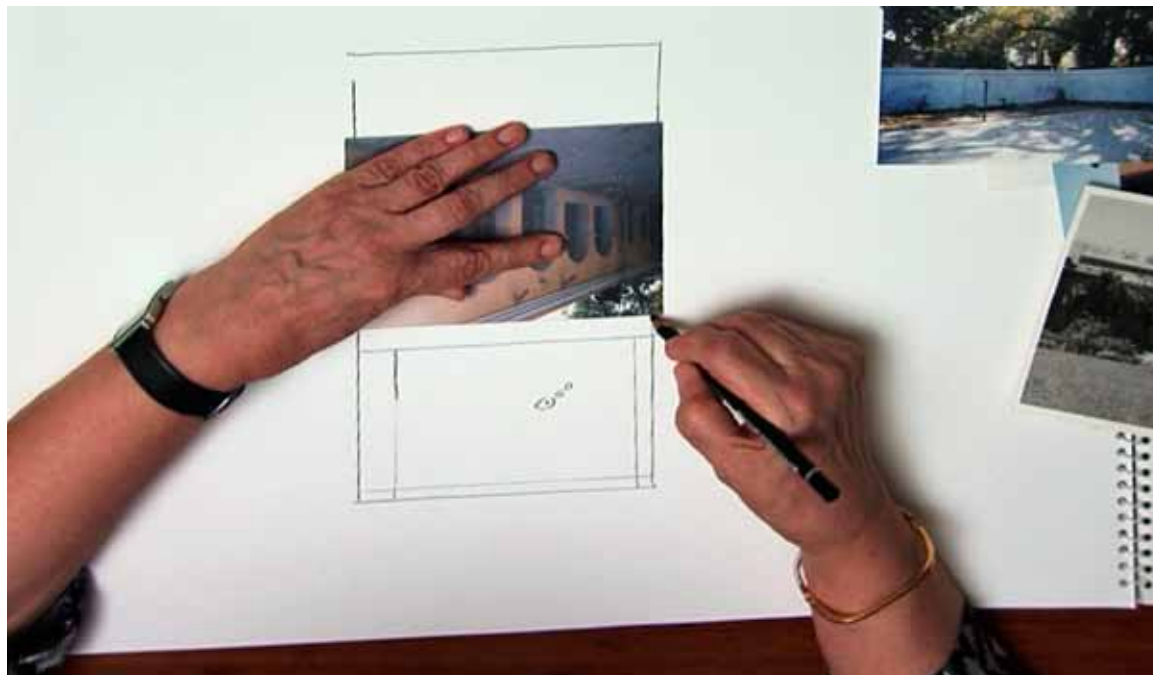


Fig 2.3.9. Sophie Ernst, *HOME*. Zarina uses a photograph of her old home in Aligarh, India to draw the plan of the house. Karachi, 2008, photograph by Amit Hussain. Project HOME, courtesy of Sophie Ernst.



Fig 2.3.10. Sophie Ernst, *HOME*. Zarina looks at photograph of her old home in Aligarh, India, as she recollects how her house used to look. Karachi, 2008, photograph by Amit Hussain. Project HOME, courtesy of Sophie Ernst.

was also used as an alternative ruler to draw the lines of the emerging plan (Figures 2.3.9 and 2.3.10).

On another occasion in the same year, at a location in Israel, Ernst initiated a conversation between two Palestinian sisters, the younger Vera Tamari and the older Tania Nasir. In this case, 63-year old, Jerusalem-born Vera, a visual artist and the Director of the Ethnographic and Art Museum at Birzeit University (located near Ramallah), did most of the drawing. She asked her 67-year old sister, the art historian and classical singer Tania, to describe their grandmother's house. Tania was born in Jaffa in 1941, and after the family had crossed the border into the West Bank in 1948, she had not visited it. Pointing at an old photograph taken of the veranda some time before their departure, she said:

I think this picture is very nice because it shows part of the veranda [of the house]. The veranda was facing the garden. I do remember because I was born in 1941. In this picture, I was seven months old. Of course, I don't remember that [because I was too young]. I remember later visits. The last visit we made in 1947.

Like Intizar in the previous example, Tania reflected on the subjectivity and changeability of memories. She said:

The thing with memories – someone tells you about it, so you *think* you remember it. But I still remember things in the house. I remember this veranda very well.

Tania's reflection also acknowledges that recollection is not a purely individual process in which objective facts are relived. Memory is malleable; it is a social process, through which past events are interpreted. In the case of the photograph of her as a baby, the picture projected an unremembered past to her, yet made it real as an image that could be recalled and reflected upon.

The following conversational fragment (quoted in Ernst, 2012, p.93) shows the interplay of verbal narration and visual articulation, as Tania and her sister Vera establish how the house looked.

Vera: How did the entrance look?

Tania: [Tania draws] Here there is a hill downwards, here was the house, for sure. The gate was made of iron and small, we entered – the path was paved, small – *I can't remember exactly how it was*. Here is the house – you went out and there is the garden.

Asking for more details, Vera forced her sister to first imagine, and then externalise the image in her drawing.

Vera: Draw the trees. How were the trees spread through the garden?

Tania: Here was the jasmine and roses and some other plants. And from here, there was a door to the veranda, which is this.

Vera: This is the veranda. The floor looks like this – black and white caro.

Tania: Sorry, you must draw it yourself.

As the sisters drew and redrew parts of the house, Tania entered a process of deeper remembering that was emotionally more intense. More features came to mind and the drawing became increasingly layered. She began to reflect on the predicament of displacement and her exploratory nostalgia turned into a more politicised anger. She noted:

Tania: The crime was not only grabbing and stealing the land, they attacked the most intimate parts – our memories and our emotional connection to our country.

(quoted in Ernst, 2012, p.95)

At this point it is useful to make a distinction between remembered and re-experienced emotions. The notion of 'remembered emotions' refers to a process of detachment from earlier experiences, for example, saying: 'remember how angry I was' with a smile. Re-experienced emotions, by contrast, refer to a reliving of earlier emotions, whether fear, anger or joy (Svašek, 2005: 200). In Tania's case, her rising anger about the loss of homeland seemed to be a re-experienced anger, caused by what she saw as the injustice of her displacement.

As we have seen, in Ernst's project, visual articulation was an important part of the process of remembering. First, photographs sparked particular memories, and second, verbalised memory fragments were translated into tentative sketches. Third, the emerging lines on paper generated new associations and questions, and further memories and lines appeared.

### From imagination to visual articulation

The following fragment comes from a conversation between 46-year old Senan Abdelquader, a Palestinian architect who worked in Jerusalem, and the 82-year old Sami Michael, an Iraqi-born Jewish writer and columnist who had to flee Bagdad because of his political activism, and had settled in Israel. The exchange was recorded in Haifa in 2008. In the following passage, a discussion



about imagination ('I imagine a street') is followed by references to 'seeing' ('I see to the right an overhang'), and actual the drawing of the visual image on paper ('give me the paper'). The exchange (quoted in Ernst, 2012, p.107) illustrates very well the collaborative nature of the project and the move from imagination and verbal negotiation to visual articulation.

Senan: I want to know from you, when you imagine the house, how you remember entering the house.

Sami: I imagine a street, very tight – a very tight alley three people couldn't go through together. I remember there was a window and people sitting there, like me and you, could talk. They called this house Im Jeddi, or Beit Michael.

Senan: Ok, we've gone into the courtyard. More than one room, or one room?

Sami: I see to the right an overhang, an open room for the courtyard. Like a sitting room for receiving people, for guests who would come from abroad. And this is furnished and has seating. There is one wall open to the courtyard. From there a door opens to face the rooms.

Senan: The rooms are on the right or the left?

Sami: give me the paper. This is an alley, this is the toilet, here, like this.

The combination of remembering and drawing functioned as a technique of focused imagination that transported both Senan and Sami to absent homes, 'non-places' that are only accessible through memory. As Ernst (2012, p.23) explained,

[m]y work in a way is to collect memories of a place – a place which they don't own anymore except as an image in their minds. That place is, in fact, a non-place.

The conversation fragment shows that process of articulating the experience of Sami's home in distant, past Iraq created a new sense of connectedness between Senan and Sami. Both men lived in Israel, but their personal trajectories were embedded in very different political histories. Their conversation, however, enabled them to share and compare experiences of non-place, a process that produced empathetic feelings.

### The installation: Bringing it all together

Ernst documented the conversations, making sound recordings and filming the sketching hands. On the basis of the resulting drawings, she then created three-dimensional architectural models out of white material (Figure 2.3.11). In the final installation, she projected



Fig 2.3.11. Camera set up during one of the interviews, courtesy of Sophie Ernst.



Fig 2.3.12 Sophie Ernst, *HOME*, 2009. Video installation, detail of model of Zarina's house. Photo: Felix Krebs, courtesy of Sophie Ernst.

the film footage of the drawing hands onto the models, as the sound of the conversations was being played (Figure 2.3.12 - 2.3.13).

Commenting on HOME, Dadi (2012a, p.158) noted that

the journey from memory to physicality, aided by a fragment of video narrative, also acknowledges that the past cannot be lived in its fullness, and that the world one faces today necessitates both remembrance and forgetting.

Exhibited as a series of installation in the space of the gallery, the result created a reflective space that stimulated visitors to think about experiences of belonging and displacement. London-based Taha Mehmood, a media practitioner who was born in Hyderabad, has used the notion of contagion to understand the working of HOME.

In HOME memories of an intimate space acquire a contagion-like quality, where remembering comes in contact with retelling. Memories become magical objects. In HOME one clearly experiences this contagious flight of memory, as it keeps affecting all those that come in contact with it

(Mehmood, 2012, p.26)



Fig 2.3.13. Sophie Ernst, *HOME*, 2009. Video installation, detail of model of Zarina's house with film projection of hands. Photo: Felix Krebs, courtesy of Sophie Ernst.

Evidently, not all gallery visitors are drawn to the installation. As one a gallery staff member told me during my visit at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park Museum in 2013, some people just rush in and out of the exhibition, not taking the time to understand what it is all about. But others, she said, spend a long time with each of the installations, looking intensely at the works and listening to the conversations. When I asked an elderly English visitor what she thought of the display, she said she was 'terribly moved'. 'I am not a refugee', she explained,

and when I watch the telly and see groups of refugees, fleeing or in camps, I don't often think of them as individuals. Hearing these voices and seeing these hands in the exhibition makes me see them as actual persons. And I am also reminded of the house I lived in as a child. I realise I can't exactly remember how one of the rooms looked.

Iftikhar Dadi (2012a, p.13) has argued that artworks like HOME have an important political significance, giving a voice to individual displaced persons.

Access to self-presentation is sometimes viewed as a mere placebo for political and economic justice, but it should be evident that articulation of voice and presence remains key to any adequate reckoning of the social conditions of many communities in South Asia and the Middle East that have resulted from catastrophic upheavals during the twentieth century.

As pointed out in the first half of this article, many Sudeten German expellees would certainly agree with this statement.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to find out how memories and unspeakable experiences of displacement are dealt with through artefacts and art. Following Köstlin, I identified a mode of engagement with 'loss of homeland' that has been common amongst Sudeten German expellees, namely the production and framing of visual images as markers of collective trauma. As we have seen, these aesthetics of loss reflected a one-sided discourse of historical objectivity and moral injustice, and most of all stimulated intra-group empathy and identification as a diasporic people who have collectively suffered. By contrast, in the project HOME, Ernst and her collaborators took a more individualistic, exploratory approach. In this case, the aesthetics of loss encouraged reflections on the dynamics of remembering and forgetting, and stimulated interpersonal identification and empathy

beyond specific displaced groups. It also critiqued the politicisation of suffering.

To simply oppose these two modes of aesthetic engagement would, however, ignore the dynamics of artefacts' social lives. As I have shown, once produced, particular material articulations of suffering were aestheticised and re-aestheticised in different ways in both cases. Over time, Sudeten German items were often reframed as objects of wider cultural significance, gaining new political meanings and emotional impact in the context of Bavarian regional politics, post-Cold War cross-border reconciliation and EU enlargement. Others gained new efficacy as they were passed on within families from one generation to the next. The HOME installations were also aestheticised in multiple ways by different members of the public. For some, they were reminders of their own predicaments of forced migration. To others, they came to stand for a more generalised nostalgia, or for an ideal of common humanity. For again others, they had no meaning or appeal at all. The processual focus of aestheticisation has highlighted these situational complexities, transitions and diversities.

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